

The Civil War Diary of William Harrison Hursh
By Wally Watkins

The Civil War diary of William Harrison Hursh, recently given to the Historical Society, chronicles his life as a private from February 20, 1865 through August 29, 1865, and offers insight into the routines and tribulations of a common soldier of the 19th century.

William Harrison Hursh was born on Valentine's Day, 1844 to Joel C. Hursh and Catherine (Dewalt) Hursh of Mifflinburg. On August 29, 1862, 18-year-old William signed up with the 150th Regiment, Company D, of the Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, known as the "Bucktails." His time with the Bucktails, although not a part of the diary, provided memories that William would recount until his death.

During September 1862, the Bucktails were assigned to guard President Lincoln's residence. Although the company only guarded the Lincolns for a matter of weeks, the men of the Bucktails would recall the friendliness and generosity of President Lincoln. William told his descendants of his great fortune in not only meeting President Lincoln, but also becoming close acquaintances with Mrs. Lincoln and Willie, Lincoln's son. William's obituary told the story of William's first encounter with the Lincolns:

"Sergt. Hursh arrived at the Soldiers' Home with the others and the soldiers were quite hungry and needed rations. Sergt. Hursh, with several others, were selected to ask for food. He met Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln and his heart was in his mouth when Mrs. Lincoln scanned him. Her eyes took in every detail, as she feared he might be a spy. Then she smiled and placed her hand on his shoulder. "Certainly my boy, you and your comrades shall have some food," she said. Mrs. Lincoln then took them into the residence and prepared corn cakes and delicious bacon, watching the food disappear with amusement."

William fondly remembered his time in the Bucktails, but the service led to the deterioration of his health. On February 28, 1863, just 6 months after joining the regiment, William received a surgeon's discharge for "disease of the left lung, defective eyes, dizziness, and pain in the head." William returned home to recuperate while the Civil War raged on.

After recovering from his injuries, William re-enlisted on February 20, 1865 with the 192nd Pennsylvania Infantry, Company I., and commenced his diary, which details the tumultuous month of April 1865.

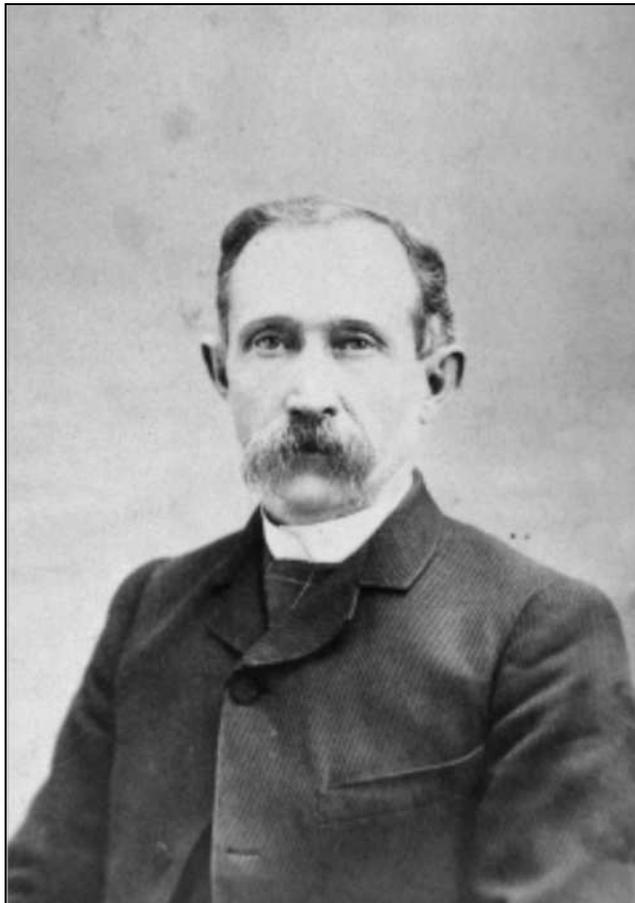
On April 10, 1865, William and his compatriots received the news that General Lee had surrendered at Appomattox Court House. Celebrations erupted amongst the soldiers and grew as rumors spread that the Union soldiers were to be discharged. The cheer of the soldiers ended abruptly on April 15, 1865, when news of Lincoln's assassination reached their encampment. William recorded that he was not able to rest that night. The 192nd Pennsylvania Infantry, along with countless others across the United States, held April 19, the day of Lincoln's funeral procession through Washington, D.C., as a day of rest.

On April 27, 1865 William wrote, "Heard they caught [John Wilkes] Booth, the assassinator of Lincoln."

The 192nd Infantry was assigned duty in Northern Virginia during the summer of 1865. William wrote of the constant drilling and waiting for letters from home. One of the last wartime acts that William participated in was the capture of Confederate General William N. Pendleton on July 16th, 1865.

William Hursh was discharged on August 24, 1865. He settled in his hometown of Mifflinburg, establishing himself as a coach maker on Walnut Street in Mifflinburg. William and his wife Susan had nine children. William passed away on November 17, 1935 at age 91, and is buried in Woodland Cemetery, Mifflinburg.

Those interested in the Hursh Diary are encouraged to visit the Union County Historical Society, where a digital copy is available. The Society has reference material on Union County Civil War veterans, and seven books on the Civil War for sale.



William Harrison Hursh